



*EI Briefing Note – October 2015*

## **Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)**

### **What is EGRA?**

The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) is an individually administered oral assessment of the most basic foundation skills for literacy acquisition in early grades. The assessment focuses on what it labels the “three early stages of reading acquisition”: emergent literacy (birth to grade 1), decoding (beginning grade 1) and confirmation and fluency (end of grade 1 to end of grade 3).

EGRA refers to both a specific assessment tool and at the same time has come to be adopted as a generic concept for early grade reading assessment programmes.

According to UNESCO, more than 60 countries carried out one or more EGRAs between 2007 and mid-2014.<sup>1</sup>

### **How is EGRA administered?**

The assessment requires about 15 minutes to administer per child. One key task requires that a child read aloud for 1 minute, and then answer questions based on that reading.

### **What are EGRA’s key positives as an assessment tool?**

EGRA focuses on early grade learning and interventions, unlike other assessments that are administered beginning in 4<sup>th</sup> grade or even later in the child’s school career. Monitoring learning in early grades helps to draw attention to discrepancies in learning outcomes in the lower years of primary education which is clearly positive from a social justice perspective.<sup>2</sup>

EGRA is designed to be flexible, adaptable and is meant to be tailored to the language and orthography of the assessment location. Different assessment tasks can be adapted or excluded in different locations. In practice, tasks targeting decoding, phonics and phonemic awareness, associated with the first two stages of literacy acquisition, are commonly emphasized, as this is where the greatest variation in skills may be found among children.

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO (2015). *Education For All 2000-2015: Achievements and Challenges*. UNESCO, p. 192.

<sup>2</sup> See Barrett, A.M. (2014). Measuring literacy post-2015: some social justice issues. In: McIlwraith, H. (ed). *Language Rich Africa. Policy dialogue. The Cape Town Language and Development Conference: Looking beyond 2015*. London: British Council, 71-77; Gove, A. (2012). Think global, act local: how early reading assessments can improve learning for all. In Wagner, D.A., M. Lockheed, I. Mullis, M.O. Martin, A. Kanjee, A. Gove & A.J. Dowd (2012). The debate on learning assessments in developing countries. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, (42)3, 509-545; Wagner, D.A. (2011). *Smaller, Quicker, Cheaper: Improving Learning Assessments for Developing Countries*. Paris: UNESCO.

### **What are EGRA's key limitations as an assessment tool?**

EGRA is based on the premise that reading acquisition takes place in linear stages, beginning with awareness of print and ultimately leading to reading fluency. Many reading experts have critiqued the underlying “stages” assumptions of EGRA, for example that comprehension and fluency must be taught separately from decoding skills.

A key concern is the ways in which comprehension is tested. The bias towards phonics is arguably one of the limitations of EGRA. The use of a stopwatch to time children in a test taking context assures uniformity of testing time but also signals that the speed of reading is the critical benchmark of good reading.<sup>3</sup> The strict timing means that slower readers are not allowed to demonstrate fully their comprehension due to the imperative to time the task.

Contrary to stated purpose, EGRA tends in practice not to be adapted to local contexts in a meaningful way.<sup>4</sup>

### **What are EI's primary concerns?**

- The ways in which EGRA is administered unfairly disadvantage some young children who do not work quickly and introduces high stakes testing to children at an unacceptably young and vulnerable age.
- Research to date is inconclusive about whether EGRA's “stage” model of literacy acquisition bears up in practice. The fact that EGRA is applied in very diverse locations adds to this concern.<sup>5</sup>
- Widespread use of the EGRA may drive curriculum, reform initiatives and pedagogical responses biasing decoding and phonics with insufficient attention to other components of reading, in particular reading comprehension. This has potential implications for national curricula, textbooks, teacher training, teaching practices and may overall lead to a failure to promote language- and literacy-rich environments inside and outside school.<sup>6</sup>

### **Why has EGRA become a subject of controversy with the post-2015 SDGs?**

In contrast to other international assessments like the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), EGRA focuses on learning in the early grades of education. EGRA is currently not being presented as comparable in the traditional psychometric sense across different languages or tests.

Yet, within the context of the Education 2030 agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, the emphasis on quality education means that EGRA-hybrid type “smaller, quicker, cheaper” assessment

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<sup>3</sup> Op. cit., Wagner, p. 96.

<sup>4</sup> See Bartlett, L., A.J. Dowd & C. Jonason (2015). Problematizing early grade reading: Should the post-2015 agenda treasure what is measured? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 40, 308–314; Trudell, B. & L. Schroeder (2007). Reading methodologies for African languages: avoiding linguistic and pedagogical imperialism. *Language Culture Curriculum*, 20(3), 165–180; Bloch, C. (2014). Growing young readers and writers: underpinnings of the Nal'ibali National Reading-for-Enjoyment Campaign. In: McIlwraith, H. (ed). *Language Rich Africa. Policy dialogue. The Cape Town Language and Development Conference: Looking beyond 2015*. London: British Council, 50-56.

<sup>5</sup> Bartlett *et al.*, op. cit. reviewed all eight publically available impact evaluations of EGRA-inspired programs and the results were ambiguous with little evidence that these interventions enabled much reading comprehension.

<sup>6</sup> Bartlett *et al*, op. cit ; Wagner, op. cit., pp.87-88.

programmes might increasingly appear as a viable tool to many decision-makers seeking to reinforce the learning of basic skills.

The origins, impact and possibilities of EGRA are important to consider in this respect. EGRA is being promoted by the Learning Metrics Task Force<sup>7</sup>, UNICEF, the World Bank, USAID, the Center for Universal Education at Brookings, and the Global Partnership for Education within the context of the Education 2030 agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. If EGRA is imposed as a global monitoring tool, rather than to allow countries to identify their own type of national assessment, donor financing may become conditional upon these assessment results.

EI believes that the use of EGRA as a global monitoring indicator is a misuse of its original purpose as a diagnostic tool. It was never intended to be used for international comparative monitoring.

Education International has worked tirelessly with UNESCO, government representatives and civil society organizations to keep EGRA off the list of global monitoring indicators for Education 2030. In the future, EGRA may be promoted as part of the Thematic Indicators associated with the implementation of Education 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals.

#### **What can national affiliates do about EGRA?**

Affiliates have a crucial role in monitoring and acting on developments related to EGRA in their areas and their implications for children's learning, teachers' work, management, wider capacity-building and relations between funding donors and recipients.

Any techniques used for assessing a young child's skills should be reviewed for their underlying assumptions about learning and what will be inadvertently promoted through administration of the assessment instrument; the conditions under which young children are assessed, and the extent to which these are stress free; and how much they actually contribute to improve instruction for children and, in this case, identify early on children who may need extra assistance in learning to read.

Furthermore, any assessment of the implications of EGRA should take into account how well EGRA programme design and results are integrated into system-wide development, for example with regard to the extent all children's reading development is supported.

This also includes considering the implications of EGRA for teachers, their work, initial education and continuing professional development training, and the ways they are included in programme design, implementation, interpretation and use of results for further development and reform.

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<sup>7</sup> Learning Metrics Task Force (2013). *Towards universal learning: recommendations from the Learning Metrics Task Force*. Montreal and Washington DC: UNESCO Institute of Statistics and Center for Universal Education at Brookings. See also Learning Metrics Task Force (no date). *Assessment for Learning (A4L): An International Platform to Support Learning Assessment Systems*. Available from [October 2015]: <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/assessment-for-learning.pdf>